

Stop Trafficking!

Awareness Advocacy Action

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FOCUS: The focus of this month's newsletter is the role of child and forced labor in the apparel industry.

The Hidden Cost of the Apparel Industry

Each time we get dressed in the morning, we most likely put on clothes tainted with child or forced labor. Only about two percent of the roughly 20 billion items of clothing sold in the United States each year are made in America.

One hundred pairs of hands touch the average garment before it finds its way to your wardrobe, and the fashion industry relies heavily on low-cost production in developing countries where labor laws are weakly enforced. From the sourcing of raw materials, such as cotton, to the processing and dyeing of textiles, assembly of garments, distribution of products, and transportation to stores and customers, many workers in the fashion industry are exploited, whether through unsafe working conditions, gender-based violence, lack of fair pay, or forced and child labor.

One in every six people alive today is estimated to work in some part of the global fashion industry. This makes it the most labor-dependent sector on earth, with most of it outsourced to the developing world. Because labor in overseas countries is cheaper and labor laws are less strict than in the United States, it outsources much of its textile products from countries such as Bangladesh, Vietnam, and India.

The clothes we choose to wear, whatever the price, have ripple effects on society, and where we decide to buy our clothes can have an impact on the fight to end child and forced labor.

The actual price of fashion is the cost of the human lives exploited within the industry.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

"This kind of work, threading drawstrings, is really common across the whole of Tirupur, they do it everywhere. For 1 rope, you get just one rupee, about 1 penny. That's 100 drawstrings on 100 pairs of shorts - repetitive work which is hard on the wrists and hands - all to earn just about \$1 (US)."

<https://www.transform-trade.org/>

[The Benchmark for the 2023 Apparel and Footwear Industry](#), the 12th publication in this benchmark series, indicates that 65 of the largest apparel and footwear companies



reveal most brands failed to disclose preventative measures to address child and forced labor risks. More than one in five companies (20%) scored 5/100 or less. Despite allegations of forced labor identified in the supply chains of almost half of benchmarked companies, only 22% proposed a proactive approach to improve outcomes for workers in their supply chains.

Women and migrant workers are among the most vulnerable when it comes to forced labor risks, especially regarding exploitative recruitment practices, such as deception during recruitment and the charging of excessive and illegal fees for a job.



Awareness

In some places in China, young women in the garment industry work 150 hours, or two extra days of 12 hour shifts each month. Over half of them have no contract and ninety percent of them have no access to unemployment insurance.

International Labor Organization

Child Labor in the Fashion Industry

According to the [International Labor Organization](#), about 160 million children are engaged in labor worldwide. Many of these children are involved in making the clothes we purchase.

The fashion industry, like most, thrives on greater and greater profits. One means of achieving this is to find ever-cheaper sources of labor. Children can be recruited quickly from families in impoverished communities in many parts of the world. They are promised well-paid jobs to support their families and, at times, a good education. They are paid minimal wages, sometimes nothing. They often work in deplorable conditions, with no opportunities for education. The fashion industry outsources its garments to these impoverished countries. Check where your clothes were made when you get dressed in the morning.

Since the fashion supply chain is complex and multilayered, it is hard for companies to control every production stage. Companies can employ children at stages of this supply chain without big brands and consumers ever finding out. Moreover, most clothing brands don't own their factories. Even when brands have strict guidelines for suppliers, work often gets subcontracted to other factories that the buyer may not even know about.

Moreover, much of the fashion supply chain requires low-skilled workers, so children work at all stages. A task like picking cotton is more suitable for children's tiny fingers, which do not damage the crop, than adults. Until 2020, children were the primary source of cheap labor in the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan, which migrant workers have since harvested. Child labor in the cotton mills has been outlawed in the United States and other countries with mechanized cotton production. However, a report by the Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations found that 60% of workers at the mills it investigated in India were under 18 when they started working there; the youngest workers were 15 when they joined. Also, in countries such as Zambia, Benin, Burkina Faso, and Mali, children often work on their family's cotton processing business. Children also work in garment factories, dyeing, sewing, embroidering, sequinning and smocking, folding and packing garments.

When the Rana Plaza Garment Factor collapsed in Bangladesh in 2013, children as young as 13 were among the 1100 people killed and 2,500 injured. Most women and children had been making garments for Walmart, Primark, Matalan, Benetton, and Mango, among other fashion brands. Moreover, following the collapse, there have been testimonies of young women and girls being beaten, threatened, and forced to work 14-hour days without a break. Child workers reported that they were forced to hide in lavatories when buyers and inspectors visited. In the years following the collapse, the link between their fatal working conditions and the high bargain prices of the garments they were making has called attention to garment factory conditions worldwide.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Supply Chains

Fashion supply chains can be extremely deep and complex, involving multiple layers of subcontractors and suppliers across different countries. This intricate network provides ample opportunities for dishonest actors to exploit vulnerable workers. From cotton farms to garment factories, workers at every stage of production can fall victim to forced labor, enduring long hours, dangerous working conditions, and withheld wages. However, the [Global Slavery Index](#) found that most forced or child labor is found in the lowest tiers of the apparel supply chains, such as the extraction of raw materials and production stages.

Lack of Transparency and Accountability

One of the most significant challenges in combating human trafficking and forced labor in fashion is the lack of transparency within the supply chain. Many brands are disconnected from the production processes, making it difficult to trace the origins of their garments. This complexity shields them from accountability, allowing exploitative practices to continue unchecked.

There is a growing demand for transparency from consumers, activists, and regulatory bodies, pressuring companies to take responsibility for their supply chains. However, even as legislation and import bans create an environment where companies are expected to demonstrate transparency around their suppliers and product sourcing, the [Know the Chain 2023 Investor Guide](#) reveals that 42% of the companies benchmarked disclosed no relevant supplier or sourcing data. This includes US brands American Eagle, Foot Locker, Kohl's, Skechers and TJX.

Gender Based Violence

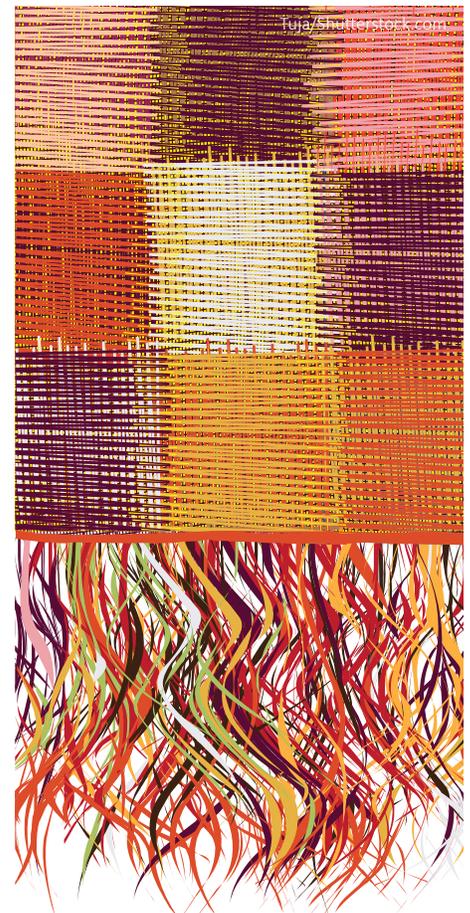
Women constitute nearly 60% of the global textile and garment supply chain workforce. For these women, risks of abuse due to the dangerous working conditions intersect with those based on gender, leading to many opportunities for exploitation.

Sexual violence on the factory floor is well-documented to be pervasive in the sector – [one study in Bangladesh](#) in 2019 found 80% of women workers have experienced or witnessed sexual assault or harassment while at work, while another [investigation in Lesotho](#) found the same was true for nearly two-thirds of women.

The abuse reported includes demeaning sexualized comments and threats, forcing women into sexual favors as a condition to retain the job, non-consensual touching, and physical violence, including hitting and sexual assault.

Forced labor and gender-based violence are closely interlinked. Minimal wages fail to cover basic needs and leave workers dependent on the employer for survival and unable to oppose the abuse. In many areas, there are barriers to women's employment, which may limit their choice to work only in apparel factories, thus making it impossible to escape.

Click [here](#) to learn more.





Advocacy

In December 2022, Burmese migrant workers filed a lawsuit against Tesco for allegedly trapping them in “effective forced labor” at a Thai garment factory and former supplier to Tesco. The workers reported working up to 99 hours a week to meet demand for large orders. Workers reported charges for rent and immigration documents were deducted from their wages, meaning many had to take out loans, becoming trapped in their jobs with no choice but to try to repay debts.

One worker alleged that: “When I was living in the compound they deduct fees for my accommodation for rent, social security, passport/work permit renewal... I had to borrow money for daily living costs such as house rent especially when our wages are late from vendors and colleagues. The interest rates for the vendors were 20% and 10%. When I worked at VK Garments I was always in debt. My mental health worsened due to my worries about the wages/debt.”

39-year-old worker at VK Garments

<https://knowthechain.org/wp-content/uploads/KTC-2023-AF-Benchmark-Report-1.pdf>

Fast Fashion

Fast fashion refers to brands that produce high volumes of clothing at a rate that allows consumers to renew their wardrobes many times a year. With the newest trend coming into the stores every week instead of twice a year based on the season, stores must constantly get rid of what is on their shelves to prepare for the new.

Clothes made by fast-fashion brands are made to last only a few times. They are sold at cheap prices, which tempts buyers into purchasing items they do not need. According to *True Cost*, people consume 400% more clothing today than 20 years ago. This demand for fast fashion, of course, creates a need for more and cheaper labor. As a result, sweatshops and forced and child labor have become increasingly prevalent to meet retailer demands.

Brands prioritizing speed and affordability often outsource production to factories that employ workers under exploitative conditions to meet the insatiable demand for cheap clothing.

Fast fashion waste

Clothing companies always want the latest fashion trends on their store shelves, meaning they must eliminate the old to make way for the new. Retailers throw away or incinerate the clothing that was not sold to make way for new merchandise.

The [Public Interest Network](#) points out that throwing away brand-new clothes means that the resource-intensive process required to make new clothes must be repeated over and over again as brands update their stock for the next trend.

Environmental impacts of waste

Another negative impact of the fast fashion industry is the pollution and multiple rubbish dumps it creates. Clothing is not biodegradable and contains chemicals that leach into the soil with time.

Because of the chemicals, clothing is not accepted in municipal landfills in the United States and ends up in landfills in some poorer countries. Shein, H&M, Forever 21, Zara, Fashion Nova, Brandy Melville, and Uniqlo are just a few examples of companies that engage with fast fashion.

Fast Fashion Links to Forced Labor

In May 2023, a bipartisan group of the United States House of Representatives members asked the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) to require that Shein, a fast fashion company founded in China, certify that its products made in China do not employ Uyghur forced labor.

Shein relies heavily on advertising on mobile apps and through social media influencers. Shein products sold in the United States had supply chains tied to Xinjiang, China. In this region, members of the Uyghur ethnic minority are being detained in forced labor camps to make products that are shipped overseas.

In addition to exploiting their workers, Shein has also been found to sell products that contain high levels of dangerous toxic chemicals.

Congress is also investigating a rival fast-fashion app, Temu, amid its popularity in the United States.

Click [here](#) to learn more.



Hidden Harm

Transparentem's investigations suggest that audit deception is a pervasive problem in apparel supply chains. Please click [here](#) to download this report.



New Transparentem Disclosure Report

"I Came Here with So Many Dreams"

Transparentem's investigation, completed in 2023, and apparel company responses to its findings bring three realities to light ([complete findings are in the full report](#)):

1. Many migrant workers at investigated suppliers reported they paid exploitative recruitment fees and faced abusive living conditions and intimidation, as well as other indicators of forced labor.
2. As of the time of publishing, just three buyers—PVH, Barbour, and Second Clothing—have committed to reimbursing migrant workers for recruitment fees and related costs. Groups of some buyers also came together to work with suppliers to improve working and living conditions.
3. Workers are still at risk of exploitation. Currently pledged repayments will not reach workers across all factories investigated and most workers will likely not receive full repayment. Recruitment-related issues still must be prevented and addressed, including in the country of origin for workers, and many reported findings still must be addressed.



The No Fees Initiative

According to the [2023 Know the Chain Benchmark Report](#), nearly two-thirds (65%) of apparel companies disclosed a general policy provision that prohibits recruitment fees in their supply chains. However, only a quarter of companies have a supply chain policy that aligns with the Employer Pays Principle (43%), specifying that the employer and not the worker must be responsible for the payment of recruitment-related fees.

Seven companies have newly disclosed a no-fee policy since 2021, including Carter's and Under Armour. Three companies have strengthened their existing no-fee policy (Burberry, Hanesbrands, and VF), suggesting a growing recognition of the forced labor risks associated with recruitment.

Uyghur Forced Labor

The US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), under the [Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act](#) (UFLPA), has stopped almost 1,000 shipments of apparel, footwear, and textiles worth more than \$42 million (US) since it was enacted in June 2022. After electronics, the clothing, footwear, and textiles industry was the second-most impacted by UFLPA enforcement, however, they had the highest number of shipments denied entry.

Potentially tainted yarn and fabric are exported from China to other garment-manufacturing countries worldwide, where factories use them to make clothes and other textile products. This would imply that 1 in 5 cotton garments in the apparel market worldwide are at risk of being tainted with Uyghur forced labor. This would create a significant risk of regulatory and ethical violations by the fashion industry.

The UFLPA is a regulation to strengthen authorities' powers to seize goods they believe could be linked to forced labor in China. This also puts greater responsibility on companies to prove their supply chains are free from such abuses and has encouraged more due diligence.

The UFLPA legislation followed crackdowns on US imports of cotton linked to the Chinese region of Xinjiang, where the Uyghur Muslims and other ethnic minorities have been subjected to human rights abuses, including forced labor at the hands of the Chinese government.

Meanwhile, in December 2023, Amy Harkins, Senior China Correspondent for [the Guardian](#), reported that a "substantial volume" of clothing tainted using Uyghur forced labor is entering the European Union market citing brands such as H&M and Zara with purchasing products made by Uyghurs forced to work in state-imposed labor programs. Chinese official describes these programs as "poverty alleviation tools."

Canada, Mexico, and the EU are also developing similar bans on goods produced with child and forced labor. The [Canadian Ombudsperson for](#)

[Responsible Enterprise](#) (CORE) investigated Nike Canada (NKE.N) and Dynasty Gold (DYG.V) to probe allegations that they used or benefited from forced Uyghur labor in their supply chains and operations in China.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

How Can You Be a Conscientious Consumer?

Educate yourself and share what you learn. Recognize that everything we purchase impacts other people and the planet. Demand transparency and avoid fashion brands that don't tell you who made their clothes.

An increasing number of fashion brands and consumers are embracing the concept of ethical and sustainable fashion. Look for certifications such as [Fair Trade](#) or [B Corporation](#).

Download the *Good On You: Ethical Brands* application. This app is available on the App Store and Google Play.

Support organizations that work to help survivors of human trafficking.



The [Fair Wear Foundation](#) has a list of over 120 brands that have signed up to its code of labor practices, which do not allow for the use of child labor. Accredited brands must ensure with regular audits that all the suppliers in the cut-make-trim stage of production meet these standards which goes beyond most companies' in-house policies.

Buy second hand. Buying secondhand clothing is good for the environment and means that children and women in forced labor will not be manufacturing a new item for you.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

What Can Businesses Do?

According to the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#), businesses have a corporate responsibility to respect the human rights of those in that business. They cannot act in a way that would adversely impact anyone's human rights, such as allowing forced and child labor to exist within the supply chain.

According to the [Slave Free Alliance](#), businesses are responsible for examining, understanding, and mapping supply chains and ensuring this practice is also passed down to suppliers and the source. Unfortunately, many industries are not yet conducting enough due diligence to address child or forced labor and human trafficking.

Transparency of the supply chain is vital because we cannot manage and make decisions about what we don't know. Increasing the visibility of suppliers and their workforces allows fashion companies to understand where their risks are globally and take the proper steps to address those risks. Fashion brands typically have 200 or more suppliers. Of concern would be if the factory is sub-contracting.

Similar to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, governments need to create relevant legislation to ensure that corporate social responsibility is not merely voluntary and that there are robust enforcement measures in case of non-compliance.

According to the [Slave Free Alliance](#), this has already started with recent legislation being developed and solidified across the world requiring mandatory due diligence reporting, such as:

The California Transparency in Supply Chains Act, 2010 (California, USA)

Modern Slavery Act, 2015 (United Kingdom)

Modern Slavery Act, 2018 (Australia)

Act on Corporate Due Diligence in Supply Chains, 2021 (Germany)

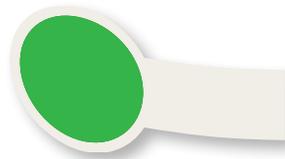
State of New York 2022, Assembly Bill A8352 (New York, USA)

United States 2022, S. 3578 Slave-Free Business Certification Act (USA)

Other accreditation systems, such as the Fairtrade Label Organization, the Global Organic Textile Standard, and the Ethical Trading Initiative, need more transparency in the garment supply chain.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Action



Child Labor to Landfills

Take Action

It is estimated that about 20 percent of garments are recycled or repurposed. The rest of these garments, made at times by children in deplorable conditions, end up in landfills. According to [The Public Interest Network](#), 92 tons of clothing, a good portion never worn, is sent to landfills in the United States each year.

Forever 21 is one of the largest fast fashion retailers in the U.S., and it churns through millions of articles of clothing every season. Whatever doesn't get sold is likely headed to the landfill. Please click [here](#) to call on Forever 21 to adopt sustainable practices and publicly commit to not trashing or burning unsold clothing.

The True Cost

This is a story about the clothes we wear, the people who make them, and the impact the industry is having on our world. The price of clothing has been decreasing for decades, while the human and environmental costs have grown dramatically. *The True Cost* is a groundbreaking documentary film that pulls back the curtain on the untold story and asks us to consider, who really pays the price for our clothing?

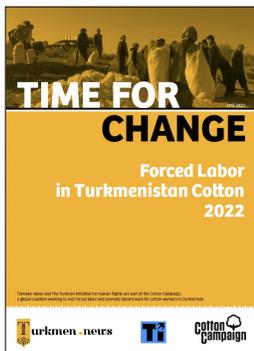


Are your bargains costing someone else's freedom?

Please click [here](#) to view this webinar by Freedom United, which was released before Black Friday in 2023. This webinar addresses the neglected topic of how human trafficking is intertwined with consumerism.

Critical discussions include the hidden cost behind artificially cheap products, navigating a predominantly consumption-oriented world, and holding companies accountable. The event features speakers with diverse perspectives, including fashion influencers, business experts, and Uyghur activists.

Topics for discussion include the connection between consumer culture and labor exploitation, the impact of overconsumption, the disproportionate effects of labor exploitation on Uyghurs in China, and tools for advocacy and informed purchasing decisions.



Time for Change

In June 2023, the Cotton Campaign, released a [report](#) calling on governments, companies, and workers' organizations to take action to press Turkmenistan to end forced labor and protect fundamental labor rights. The Cotton Campaign is a global coalition dedicated to ending forced labor and promoting decent work for Central Asian cotton workers. The report documents systematic forced labor, underpinned by endemic corruption, in Turkmenistan's annual cotton harvest.

Fair Trade

The Fair-Trade label has come under scrutiny lately. The Fair-Trade [website](#) states that auditors inspect Fairtrade producers on a regular basis and pay special attention to certain areas and products where child labor is a risk. In addition, depending on the findings, Fairtrade suspends or de-certifies the producer organization where these worst forms of labor (e.g. child trafficking) are found until protective and corrective measures are put in place.

If child labor is detected, Fairtrade takes immediate action to address it and to protect the children involved in accordance with Fairtrade's Child Labor and Forced Labor Guidelines. Fairtrade producer organizations must build partnerships with local civil society organizations and child rights organizations to remediate situations of abuse or exploitation and ensure children do not become revictimized.



The Secret Life of Clothes

Have you ever considered who made the clothes you wear? You may not realize, but behind every single piece of clothing we wear, is a story about how it was made and by whom. In this short video you go behind the scenes to the people who make our clothes!

Please click [here](#) to view this short video.



Fashion Takes Action (FTA) is a non-profit organization established in 2007 to advance sustainability in the entire fashion system – those who make, sell, buy, wear, dispose, reuse, repair, and recycle clothing! Their role is to remove barriers to sustainability through education, awareness, research, and collaboration. Please click [here](#) to find more about resources and actions you can take under the Fashion Takes Action campaigns.

Debt, Wage Theft, and Coercion Drive the Global Garment Industry

Major fashion brands including the owners of Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfinger have agreed to pay over \$500,000 in compensation to migrant workers in Mauritius. These workers from across Asia had been forced to pay illegal recruitment fees and, alongside other indicators of forced labor, were allegedly subject to deception and intimidation. Exploitative practices like this are common. All garment workers can experience unacceptable forms of exploitation that can only be countered through sustained labor organization.

Transform Trade

Transform Trade is a global community of farmers, workers, collectives, campaigners, donors and supporters, we work together for trade that values people over profit. They stand with workers demanding reform and campaign for legislative and policy change while also supporting collectives working for better conditions and fair pay.

Clothes Made by or to Support Survivors of Human Trafficking



ReThreaded: Unique Products Created by Survivors of Human Trafficking

Every purchase and donation directly helps survivors with employment, counseling, and career development.



Elegantees

Offers apparel for both women and men. Each purchase supports the employment of survivors from of sex trafficking and those at risk of human trafficking in Nepal. Elegantees also donates excess profits to organizations that fight human trafficking.



Made for Freedom

Made for Freedom products are made by survivors of exploitation and marginalization



Joyya

Offers apparel for women and men. Joyya supports job training and employment opportunities for those at risk of exploitation in India, Nepal and the United States.



MulxiPLY Collaborative

Sells jewelry, apparel, bags, and accessories. This business provides local employment to individuals in Nepal at risk of human trafficking.



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